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MEDIA IMAGE OF BELARUS ABROAD IN 2021–2022

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ABSTRACT

- *This study describes the ways in which the foreign media covered Belarus in 2021–2022. Using qualitative analysis of 17 international media outlets, as well as eight semi-structured interviews with foreign journalists, we analysed which events attracted media attention, how journalists chose topics related to Belarus, etc.*
- *The media analysis allowed us to draw several conclusions. Firstly, the international media cover Belarus primarily in the context of geopolitical events, such as the war and migration crisis. Secondly, the Belarusian authorities — and Lukashenka in particular — were the central figures in articles about Belarus, while Tsikhanouskaya and the Belarusian opposition received less coverage. Thirdly, the international media depicted Belarusians as victims of the regime who do not support the war in Ukraine; accordingly, the main reasons that the Belarusian protest movement was not successful were said to be repressions and Russia’s aid to the regime.*
- *Interview respondents were representatives of major global media outlets: journalists who had been covering Belarus since at least the beginning of the 2020 presidential election. Unsurprisingly, the number of Belarus-related stories has decreased compared to 2020. Nevertheless, respondents insisted that foreign audiences found the rise of the Belarusian pro-democracy movement in 2020 memorable — and the journalists themselves remain curious about the country and the people that they covered. This curiosity, however, often runs counter to the editorial policy of their employers — which requires them to write about “niche” topics (like Belarus) mostly in the context of crises and breaking news. The main question that interests Western audiences is the role of Belarus in Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.*
- *Despite the ties between foreign journalists and the Belarusian opposition, obstacles to journalists’ work in Belarus (entry bans, denial of accreditation, impeded access to source material in Belarus), significantly complicate media coverage of the country. What’s more, the topic of Belarus remains “niche” for foreign audiences. Placing the topic of Belarus in a global context that attracts the interest of the international media, as well linking it to regional security, could, in our opinion, help increase the amount of attention Belarus gets in the media — as well as from foreign politicians.*

INTRODUCTION

In 2021 to 2022, the international media covered Belarus against the backdrop of the main event unfolding in the region — the war in Ukraine. This places the Belarusian agenda in a very different framework compared to a year ago. Just last year, journalists were focusing on human rights violations, the activities of Belarusian civil society, and Tsikhanouskaya. The results of our research reveal significant changes to the media image of Belarus and Belarusians.

For our research, we relied on two methodologies: qualitative content analysis of 17 non-Belarusian media outlets and qualitative semi-structured interviews with foreign journalists.

Not only did this help us get a feel for the image of Belarus in the international media, it also enabled us to track changes in depictions of the country abroad¹. Studying the media image of Belarus around the world will give

social and political actors a better understanding of perceptions of Belarus among citizens and politicians in other countries. This will help the former make effective and goal-oriented strategy choices for cooperating with journalists, politicians, and representatives of other countries.

Acknowledgements: the authors of this study would like to express their gratitude to the team of researchers and foreign journalists who spoke with us.

METHODOLOGY

Our research centred around two main questions: 1. How did the global media cover events in Belarus from June 2021 to July 2022? 2. How do journalists from the international media work when covering the Belarusian agenda? To answer these questions, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of 17 media outlets from 10 countries and held eight interviews with foreign correspondents.

Table 1. Materials and respondents

<i>Country and media</i>	<i>Journalists and freelance associates of the media outlets</i>
1. Brazil - Folha de S.Paulo (522) ²	1. The Guardian, (UK)
2. UK - BBC UK (64), The Guardian (151), The Independent (256)	2. The Guardian (UK)
3. Germany – Die Zeit (325), Deutsche Welle (216)	3. TT Nyhetsbyrå (Sweden)
4. Spain – El Mundo (337)	4. Die Zeit (Germany)
5. USA – Washington Post (92), The Hill (257), NPR (348)	5. Le Monde (France)
6. Lithuania – Delfi LT (351)	6. Foreign Policy magazine (USA)
7. Poland – Rzeczpospolita (1638), Wyborcza (1751)	7. LRT.lt (Lithuania)
8. France – Le Monde (316)	8. English-language service of Meduza (Russia/Latvia)
9. Ukraine – Ukrainska Pravda (824), UNIAN (1843)	
10. Japan – NHK (468)	

Total: 9760 articles

¹ You can read our first study of Belarus’s media image here: shorturl.at/kmqAQ

² Number of articles

The qualitative content analysis was carried out using Margrit Schreier's methodology (2012). Qualitative content analysis makes it possible to describe large arrays of secondary data fruitfully and systematically. At the same time, the creation of a code network to systematise data requires thorough preliminary study of the material and a well-thought-out approach to the segmentation and naming of the data. Our analysis began with a detailed study of one of the selected media outlets, based on which we created primary categories and sub-categories. Next, our group of researchers coded the publications of three other media outlets in various languages, which served as the basis for checking and validating the code table. As a result, we settled on thematic categories that corresponded to the criteria of the code (unidimensionality, mutual exclusiveness, and saturation), characterising our sample of articles for analysis broadly and comprehensively (Schreier, 2012, Chapter 4³). Ten researchers took part in this analysis, which was held over the course of two months. All ten researchers underwent preliminary methodological training and are fluent in one of the languages of the media analysed. After systematically organising the articles, we conducted an SPSS analysis of the data.

As in the previous study, the primary focus of our media analysis remains leading Western media outlets. Nevertheless, in order to identify possible deviations and to further study the media image of Belarus in other countries and cultures, this year we added popular Japanese and Brazilian media to our analysis as well. In countries with widely read media outlets that write frequently about Belarus, such as Poland, the USA, Germany, and the UK, we analysed several sources. Going forward, we would like to broaden our sample in order to cover more media outlets and countries. Even as we widen our scope, quality will always remain a vital principle for us. For most of the media analysis, we purchased premium subscriptions, giving us access to all available articles in the desired period. Our analysis covered 14 July 2021 to 14 July 2022, based on the chronology of the previous period, which ended on 13 July 2021. Our sample included articles where Belarus was mentioned either in the headline or in the article itself. Our sample for the given period included 9,760 articles from 17 media outlets.

Media analysis alone is not sufficient to form an adequate understanding of how the media decides on certain topics. Recognising factors such as the organisational structure of media outlets, as well as the agency (or lack thereof) of articles' authors, we conducted a series of interviews with foreign journalists. The goal of our conversations was to understand the principles, motivations, and sources that guided journalists as they chose topics and angles for texts about Belarus. Semi-structured interviews were our research's second methodology. The conversations with foreign journalists took place on Zoom in September – October and lasted up to 50 minutes. All respondents granted us permission to use the opinions they expressed during the interviews in our research. All in all, we conducted eight interviews with representatives of major foreign media outlets, including freelancers who work with them on a permanent basis. When selecting respondents, we tried to include representatives of media outlets that actively covered the events in Belarus included in our media analysis. At the same time, because we met with a certain number of refusals, we recruited some of our respondents using the snowball method. The interviews were held in English.

³ Schreier, M. (2012) *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*. Sage Publications, London.

HOW DID THE FOREIGN MEDIA COVER THE EVENTS THAT UNFOLDED IN BELARUS IN 2021–2022?

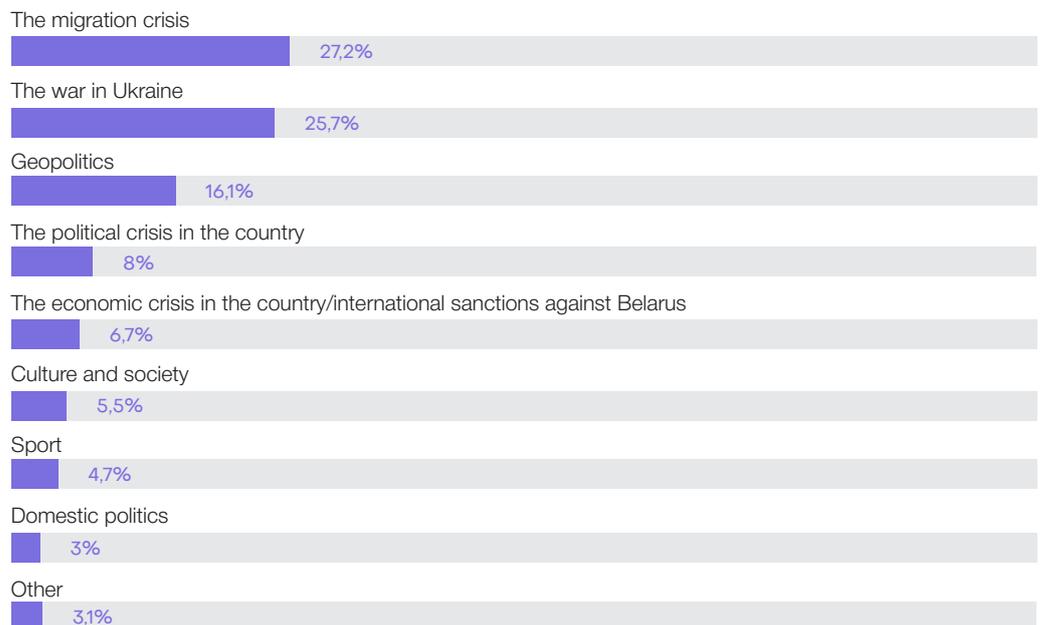
In mid-2021, Belarus returned to the media spotlight due to its involvement in several events of international significance. In May 2021, the Belarusian authorities forced a plane to land in order to arrest Belarusian journalist Raman Pratasevich. Later, Minsk provoked a migration crisis on the Belarusian-EU border in which it acted both as a provocateur and negotiator/manipulator of the West. During the months of the border crisis, Lukashenka gradually forced the West to again recognise his agency in international politics, which led to an intensification of his media presence around the globe. In early 2022, Belarus began to attract the attention of the international media due to the joint military exercises with the Russian army on Belarusian territory. If in January media attention was riveted to Russia and its preparations for war, then after 24 February Belarus began to acquire the image of a co-aggressor vis-a-vis Ukraine. Based on these key events and people, we analysed how journalists depicted Belarus; Belarusians within the country and in emigration; and the relationships between Lukashenka and the West, the Belarusian authorities and Ukraine, and Lukashenka and Putin. We also touched upon the Belarusian protest movement and repressions in Belarus, the migrant crisis, and the war in Ukraine. As in our previous study of Belarus’s international media image, we analysed usage of the country’s name (Belarus vs. some equivalent of “White Russia/Belorussia”). The results of our analysis are presented below.

BELARUS AND THE IMAGE OF BELARUSIANS

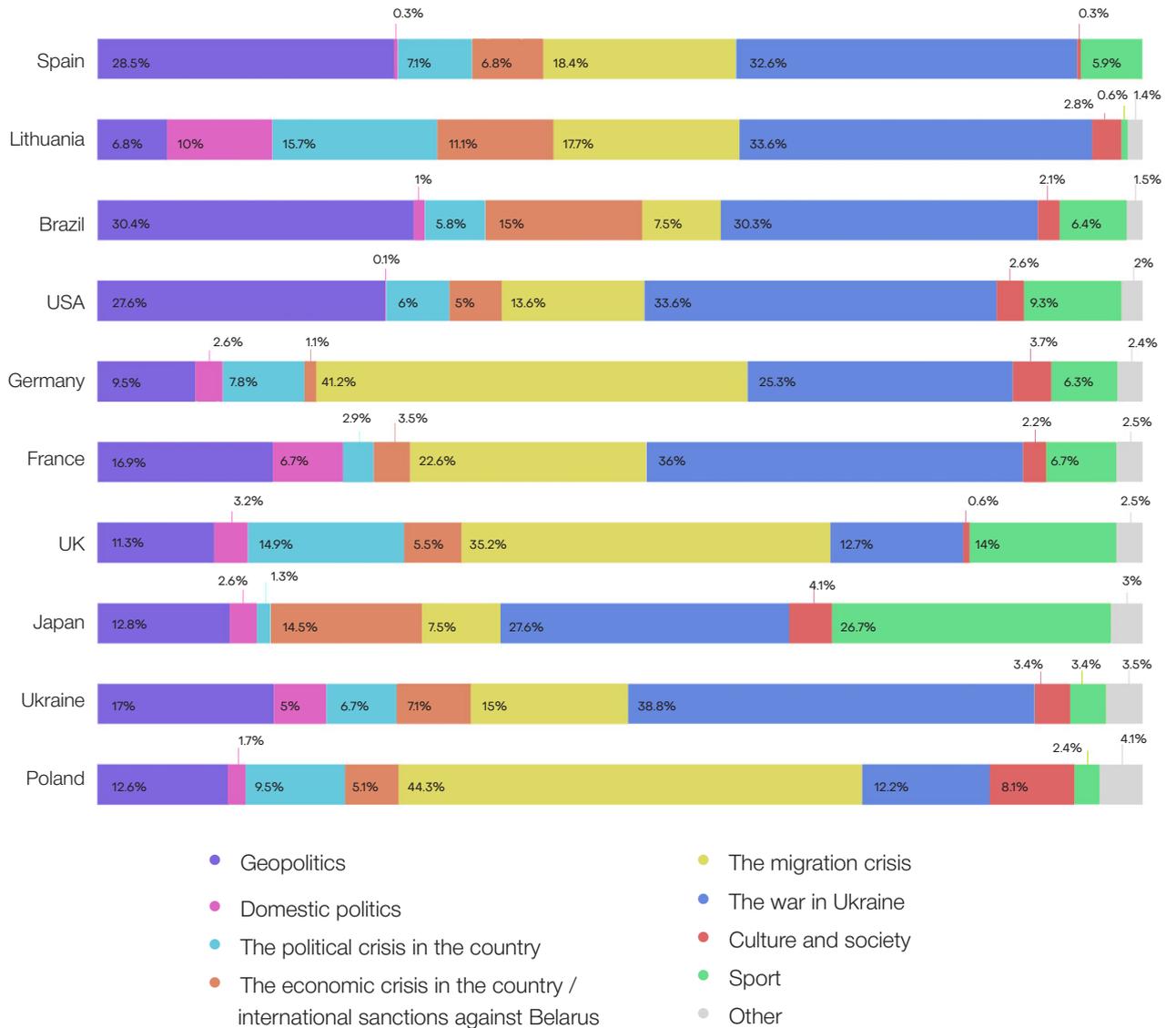
As part of our analysis, we examined the contexts in which Belarus was placed. First and foremost, the selected media outlets wrote about Belarus in articles about the migration crisis and the war. The political crisis and domestic politics, as well as culture, received less attention. Articles devoted to the geopolitical context were more popular: such articles were most common in countries far from Belarus, like the USA and Brazil, whereas Poland and Lithuania were the most likely to write about the migration crisis and the war in Ukraine. As expected, the war was a highly important topic for the Ukrainian media.

Other countries paid more attention to other events. Thus, Polish media outlets were more likely than others to write about culture and society, while Japanese ones were most interested in sport, given the participation of Belarus in the Tokyo Olympics.

Graph 1a. Belarus in context

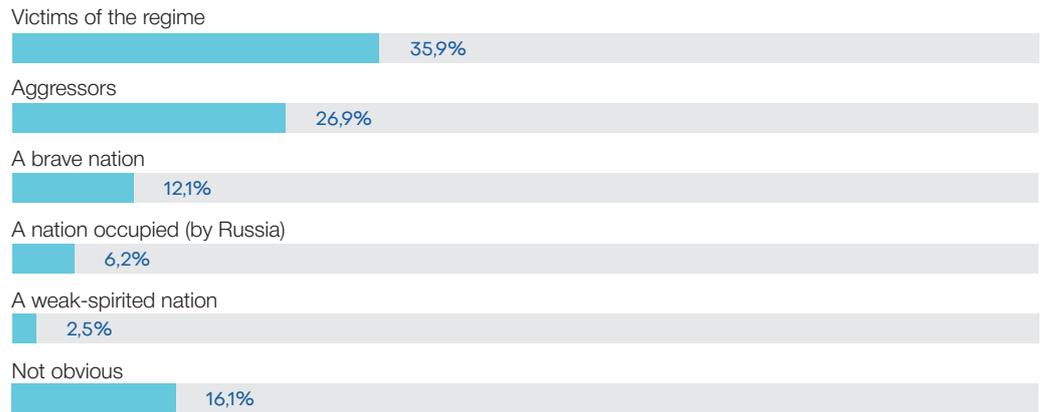


Graph 1b: Belarus in context, distribution by country

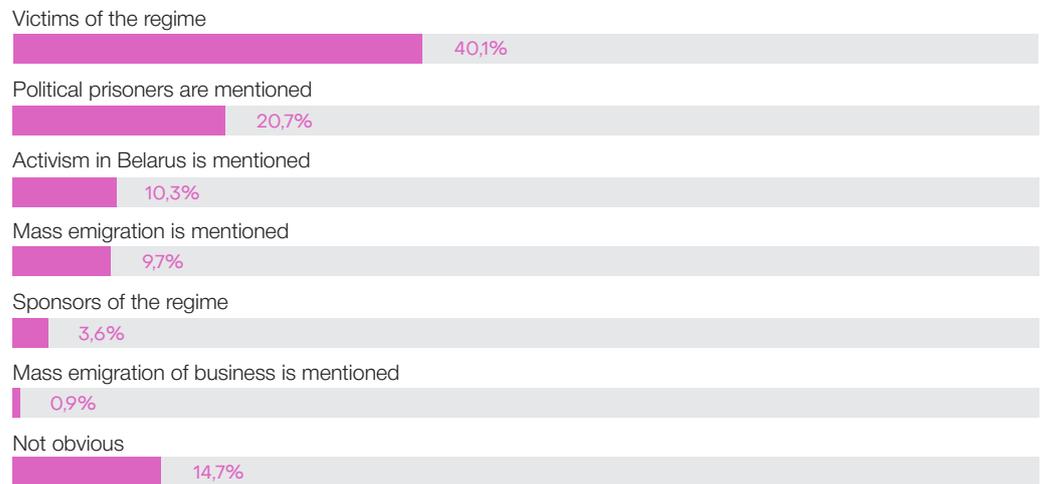


As of the start of the conflict, Belarusians are more often perceived as co-aggressors in the war against Ukraine. On the other hand, the image of Belarusians as a brave and peace-loving nation, which was created in 2020, has not been forgotten either. Realising their role vis-a-vis the regime's actions, Belarusian public opinion leaders have tried to persuade Belarusians of their collective guilt (or lack thereof) in the war. When we checked what international media outlets were writing on this topic, we came across a similar dichotomy: aggressors vs. victims. Nevertheless, some articles described Belarus as being a brave nation or as a people under Russian occupation. When articles were about Belarusians within the country, they were more likely to portray Belarusians as victims. Notably, the image of Belarusians as sponsors of the regime is most common in the Ukrainian media. The emigration of Belarusians was a particularly resonant topic in Poland, whereas the Lithuanian press was more likely than others to write about activism and protests within Belarus. In articles that touch upon Belarusians, 20% of materials mentioned political prisoners and repressions. The German and Lithuanian press were more likely than others to mention political prisoners.

Graph 2a: The image of Belarusians

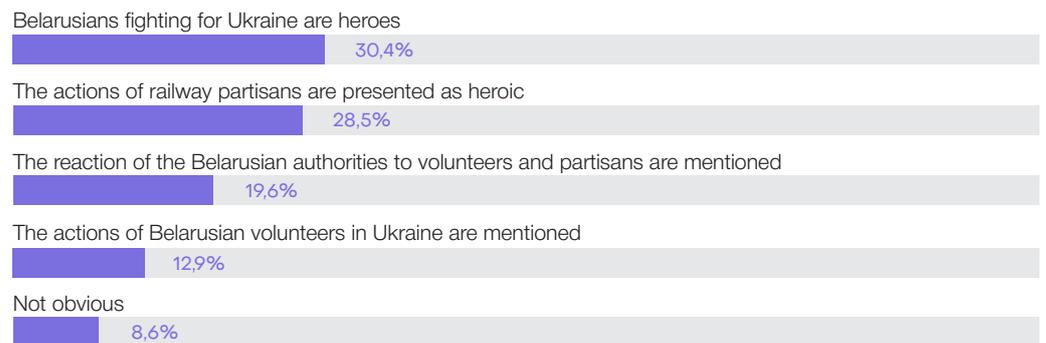


Graph 2b: The image of Belarusians within Belarus



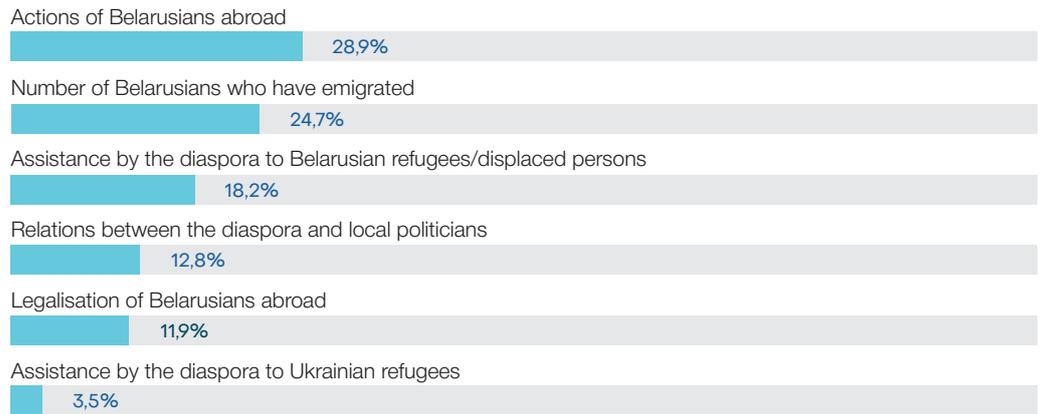
We also examined descriptions of Belarusians fighting for Ukraine, railway partisans, and volunteers in Ukraine. It should be noted that these groups were mentioned in only about 1.5% of analysed articles. Most often, international media outlets depicted Belarusian volunteers and partisans as heroes. The Ukrainian media were more likely than others to write about volunteers and railway partisans in a positive light.

Graph 3: fighters for Ukraine, railway partisans, and volunteers



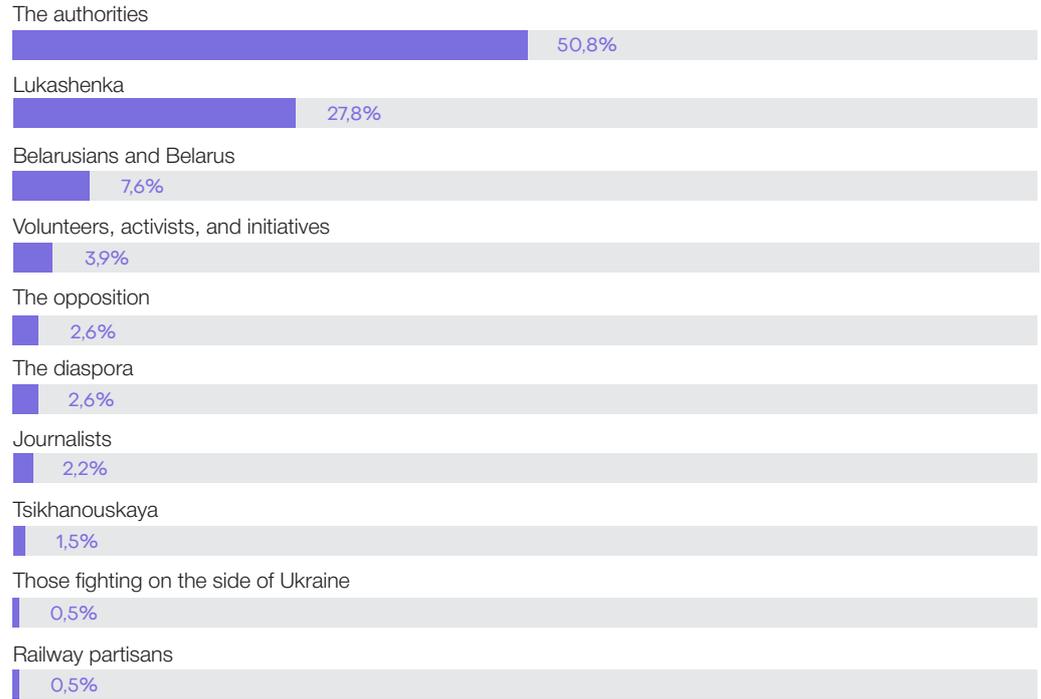
Given the exceptional role of Belarusians in exile, basically representing civil society in emigration, we also examined the context in which the Belarusian diaspora was described; 5.5% of articles were devoted to this topic. Almost a third of journalistic materials about diaspora covered the actions of Belarusians abroad and the aid provided by the diaspora to Belarusian refugees. The British media stood out especially: in 75% of articles about the diaspora, the author mentioned the help provided to Belarusian refugees. Journalists also wrote about the legalisation of Belarusians abroad, as well as their relations with local politicians. In total, 25% of articles that mentioned the diaspora brought up the number of Belarusians who have emigrated since the 2020 protests.

Graph 4: The diaspora



During the pilot analysis, we got the impression that the presence of Tsikhanouskaya and the Belarusian opposition abroad had significantly decreased compared to last year. Therefore, we investigated who had become central in the foreign media. Our analysis confirmed that the central figures in journalistic material are now the Belarusian authorities and Lukashenka (79%), whereas Tsikhanouskaya and the opposition were present in a minority of articles (4%). In the next section, we will show how the foreign media depicted Tsikhanouskaya and Lukashenka.

Graph 5: central figures

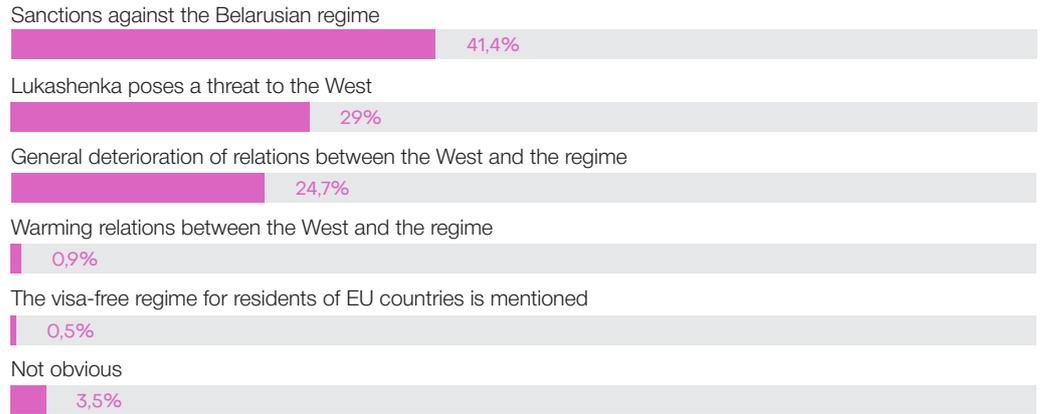


THE BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES

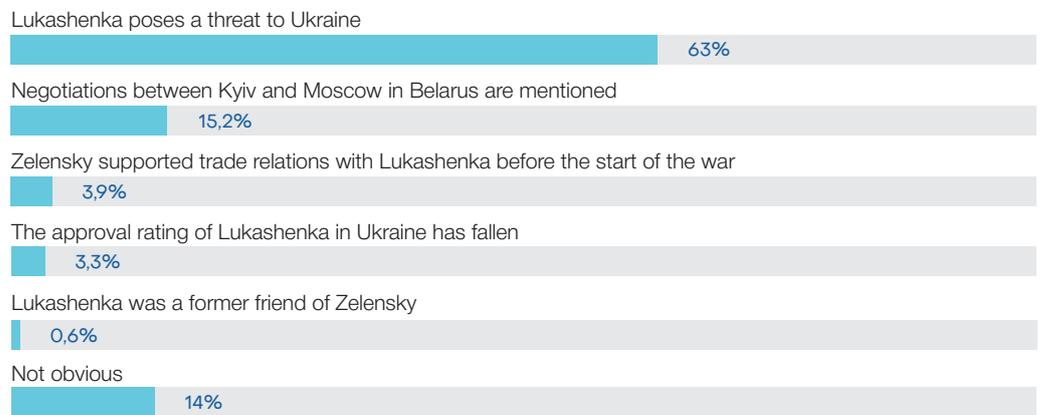
Lukashenka was a central figure in 28% of articles, most of which comprised a discussion of his personal position regarding the war in Ukraine, as well as his relationship with Putin. In order to understand depictions of Lukashenka’s relationship with Putin, we grouped opinions into several categories, the most popular of which was that Lukashenka is a friend and partner of Putin (73%) rather than a puppet (22%).

We also analysed the context in which the relations of the Belarusian authorities towards the West were mentioned. Most often, the international media wrote about sanctions against the Belarusian regime. This was especially true of the countries that are furthest away from Belarus geographically: the USA, Japan, and Brazil. Articles also presented the thesis that Lukashenka represents a threat to the West. 16% of materials about relations between the Belarusian government and Ukraine described negotiations between Moscow and Kyiv on Belarusian territory. The Ukrainian media highlighted the trade relations between Belarus and Ukraine before the war, also underlining the fall of Lukashenka’s rating in Ukraine.

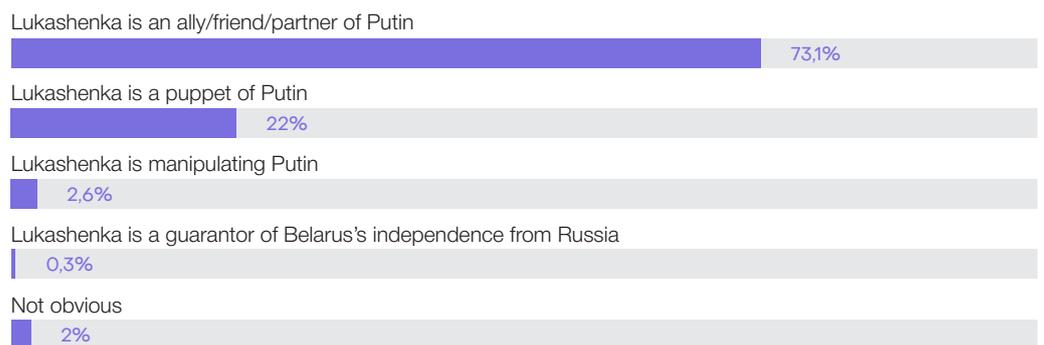
Graph 6: the Belarusian authorities (the West)



Graph 7: the Belarusian authorities (Ukraine)



Graph 8: Lukashenka-Putin



**THE
BELARUSIAN
OPPOSITION
IN EXILE**

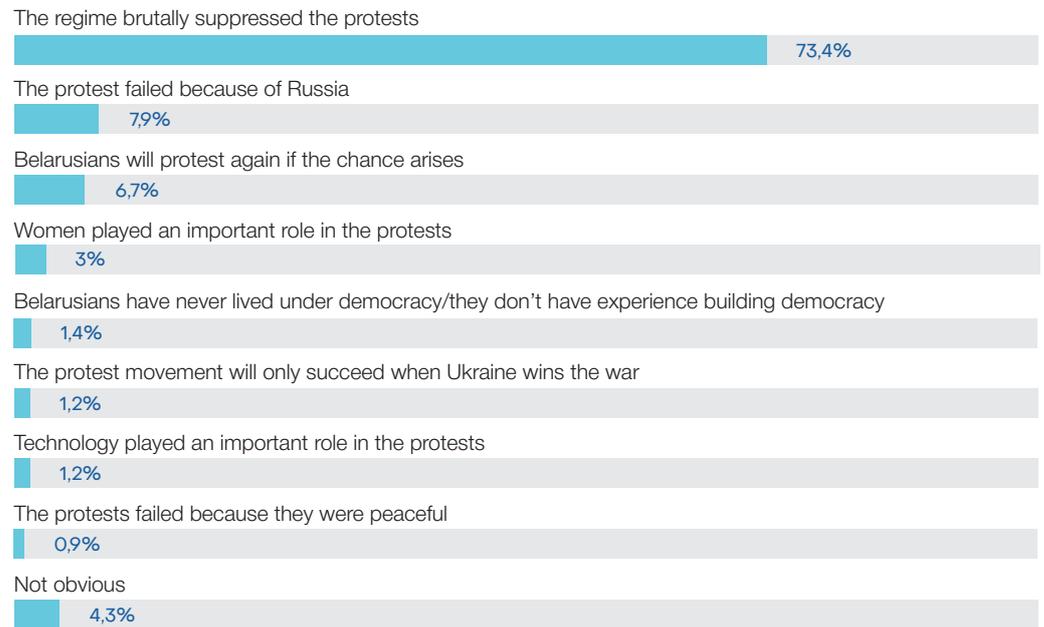
Unlike Lukashenka, Tsikhanouskaya was given much less space in the international media. Most of the times she was mentioned, the media covered her international visits (29%) and efforts aimed at democratising Belarus (22%). Compared to Lukashenka (1.5%), journalists were much more interested in Tsikhanouskaya’s personal story (16%). This can be explained by Lukashenka’s image as the person who ultimately still has power; as a result, his political actions and statements are at the centre of attention. In contrast, Tsikhanouskaya embodies the concept of a “political celebrity” who doesn’t have direct access to power; social attitudes towards her have been formed through the representation and discussion of the radical changes in her personal life.

**THE
BELARUSIAN
REVOLUTION,
WAR IN UKRAINE,
AND MIGRATION
CRISIS**

The specific events that we chose to analyse probably do not paint a complete picture of media coverage of Belarus; however, our research did confirm that they were core events for the foreign media (see graph 1). Details are below.

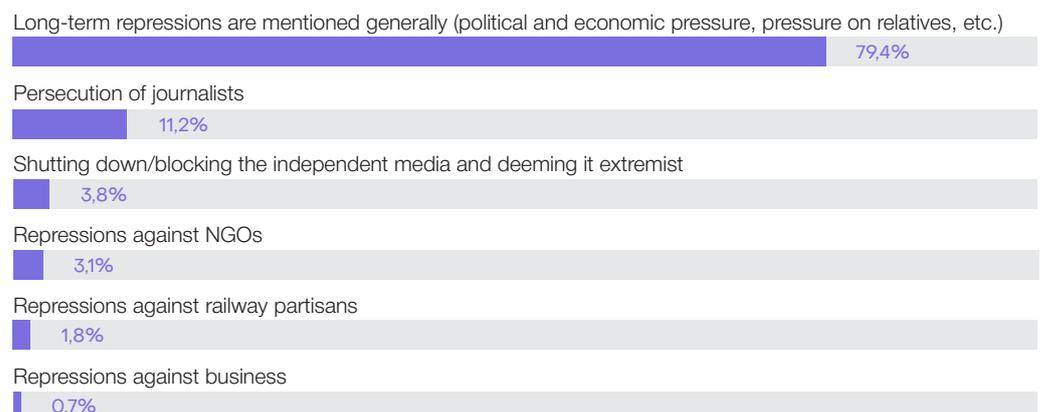
We tried to find an explanation for how the media reported on the Belarusian protests of 2020 (10% of articles touched upon this topic). In all, 73% of journalists noted that the regime had harshly repressed the protests, and that the protests had “failed” because of Russia. It was also suggested that Belarusians would protest again if the chance arose. This opinion was particularly prevalent in the Ukrainian media. The role of women in the events of 2020 was also highlighted: the German media was the most likely to underline the role of women in the protests.

Graph 9: Belarusian protests of 2020



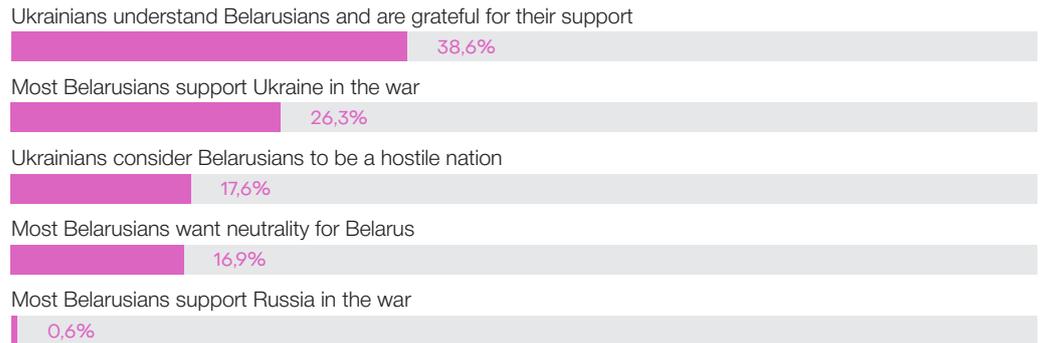
Like last year, journalists in the foreign media covered repressions, but only in 13% of articles. Although they primarily paid attention to general political and economic repression, they also mentioned persecution of journalists and the blocking of certain media sites.

Graph 10: Repression in Belarus



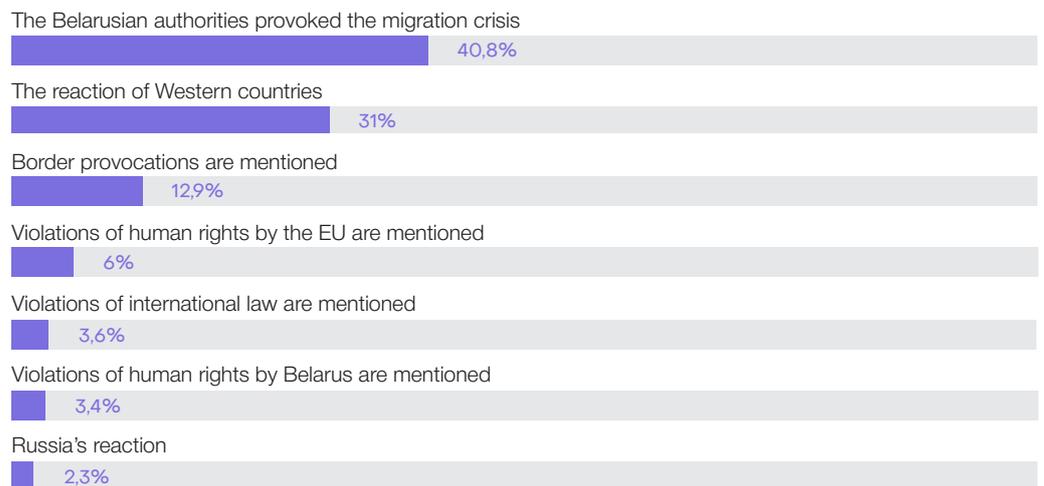
As we noted above, the war was one of the two most covered events in the international media. In the materials we analysed, the dominating opinion was that Ukrainians understand Belarusians and most Belarusians support Ukraine in the war. In the British media, this opinion was voiced by 96% of articles. At the same time, 18% of articles claimed that Belarus had become an enemy nation in the eyes of Ukrainians. This opinion was reiterated in 48% of Ukrainian articles that wrote about Belarus in the context of the war. Interestingly, less than 1% of articles relayed the opinion that Belarusians support Russia in the war.

Graph 11: War



The most covered event was the migration crisis. The claim that the Belarusian government was behind the migration crisis was particularly popular. The media cited examples of provocation by the Belarusian regime on the border with the EU, also writing about the reaction of Western countries. The German and Brazilian media were the most likely to write about human rights violations by the EU and unfair treatment of migrants.

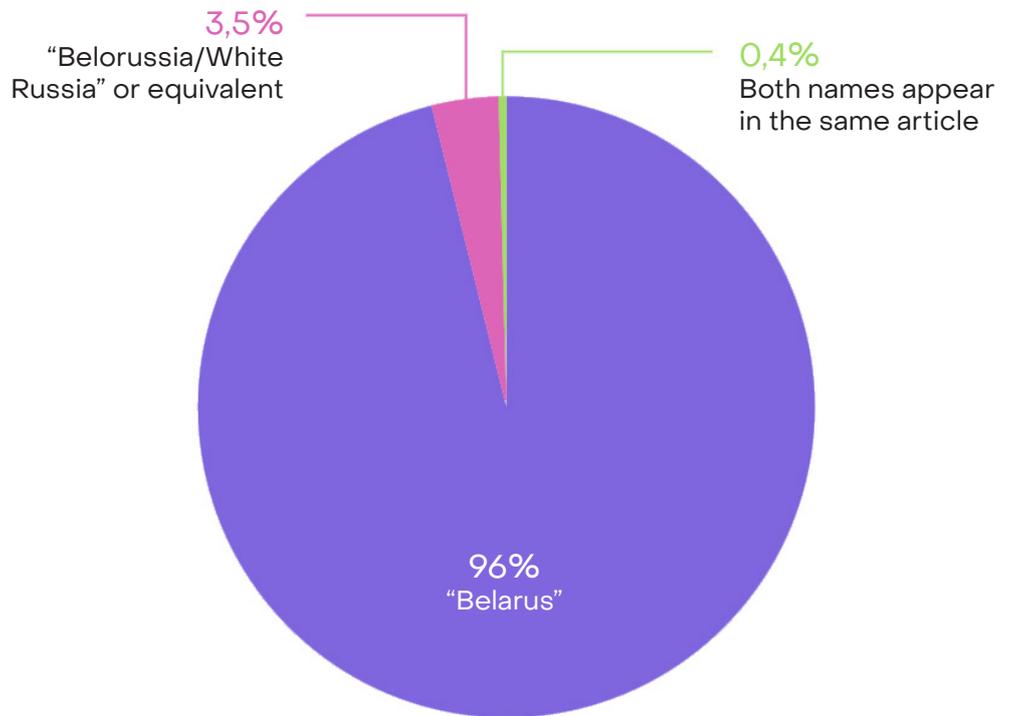
Graph 12. The migration crisis



**“BELARUS”
VS. “WHITE
RUSSIA /
BELORUSSIA”**

The country is increasingly being referred to as “Belarus” in various languages. We noticed a decrease in usage of the term “White Russia” (Weißrussland) in the German media of more than 2% over the last year; today, the term is used in 0.2% of articles, while 3.5% of articles use both names interchangeably. The Spanish newspaper El Mundo continues to use an equivalent of the term “Belorussia/White Russia”. All other media outlets and countries (96%) call the country Belarus.

Graph 13: “Belarus” vs. “White Russia/Belorussia”



INTERVIEWS WITH JOURNALISTS: “THE EVENTS OF THE LAST TWO YEARS SHOULD CHANGE HOW WE PERCEIVE THIS REGION OF THE WORLD”

We conducted eight interviews with foreign journalists who have been covering Belarus at least since the 2020 presidential elections. We asked them what topics they covered in 2021–2022 and how their materials are perceived by their intended audience.

When deciding on interview questions and describing the context for respondents, we operated under the assumption that during the protests and social upheaval of 2020, the international media was relatively interested in writing about Belarus and covering the inspirational democratic movement. In time, protest activity slowed down, the domestic political crisis dragged on, and it became more difficult to find captivating stories that appeal to foreign audiences. What’s more, Belarus’s participation in Russia’s aggression against Ukraine negatively affected its image.

All respondents noted that interest in Belarus dropped significantly compared to 2020, and that a large portion of their resources had been allocated to covering events in Ukraine. One respondent noted that the volume of work being devoted to Ukraine was so great that they didn’t even have time to cover the election campaign in their own country: they were forced to curtail coverage of all other events, not just topics related to Belarus.

However, respondents noted that if it weren’t for the war, the media would continue to write about Belarusians’ fight within the country, drawing attention to political affairs and the human rights situation.

According to respondents, significant factors hindering coverage of Belarus included the fact that they and their colleagues had been stripped of their accreditation by the Belarusian Office of Internal Affairs and that most of their colleagues from Belarus — who were their contacts — have been forced to flee the country. Similarly, freelancers associated with major international media outlets who had been covering events on the ground in Belarus in 2020 have been persecuted by the authorities. They weren't willing to take major risks and work under such dangerous conditions.

“Belarus is a closed media space: there is little access to first-hand information from inside the country; there isn't much information even in Russian: journalists for English-language and other international media outlets have a hard time working this way.”

Most traffic naturally stems from breaking news, including coverage of crises. In the absence of such stories, less attention is paid to the country. In this case, too, seeking out other stories that can attract the attention of readers is worthwhile:

“Our editors try to do more than simply write stories about the news cycle and crises, but it's difficult to cover Belarus outside of this framework, which is partially because of access issues: few Belarusians within the country are willing to take part in recorded conversations.”

Another important factor is that Belarus is perceived as a relatively minor player in the region.

“The English-language foreign media does not see Belarus as a ‘major player’, but rather as a ‘niche topic’; therefore, the country generally gets attention during crises and protests. On the topic of Belarus, we give explanations on how various events affect regional security.”

Before 2020, the German press did not actively write about Belarus, but during the elections more materials started appearing:

“We began to pay attention to Belarus in June–July of 2020, and even then, it didn't take up much space in the media landscape. In Germany, the topic of Eastern Europe was covered mostly through the lens of Russia's importance, which, in my opinion, isn't entirely fair.”

This paradigm is common in both the European and American media:

“For better or for worse, by and large American society has a poor understanding of what's happening in Belarus.”

AN ECHO OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN AND PROTESTS OF 2020 REMAINED IN THE MEMORIES OF FOREIGN MEDIA CONSUMERS.

“In London, I was chatting with friends who follow politics a little: this was when Navalny had been poisoned and there were protests in Belarus too. Their reaction was ‘Navalny...who's that again? Oh, the protesters in Belarus—that's an incredible story!’”

Stories about Belarus during the protests often appeared on the front page of British newspapers, and the narrative about Belarusians' fight for democracy resonated with audiences. But in time, when the situation became more “depressing”, the amount of material on the subject decreased.

“It was very convenient to write about Belarus when there was a striking female trio in the political arena. The story of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the mother of two children who decided to go into politics, aroused a considerable amount of sympathy. Memorable personal stories such as these help grab readers' attention.”

“Siarhei Tsikhanousky is an interesting figure. It would be possible to follow his actions in the context of viral politics”.

In the Lithuanian media, coverage of Belarusian politics in 2020 “blew up”, as audience curiosity turned out to be unexpectedly high:

“The Lithuanian public was optimistic about the protests: at last democratic change is taking place in Belarus.”

THE MIGRATION CRISIS AND REPRESSIONS WERE AMONG THE MAIN TOPICS THE FOREIGN MEDIA COVERED BETWEEN THE END OF THE PROTESTS AND THE BEGINNING OF THE WAR.

All respondents claimed that they and their colleagues had covered the migration crisis on the Belarusian-EU border and the Ryanair episode, as well as the Russian-Belarusian military exercises immediately prior to the war. Because most journalists were stripped of their accreditations, reporting took place outside of Belarus, with many reporters travelling to the border to cover the migration crisis.

The majority of respondents have continued to write about topics that they personally find to be important, such as human rights, the intersection of Polish and Jewish heritage in Belarus, and the fate of the protesters.

“If you write about Belarus and don't cover the human rights situation, that's shoddy journalism.”

As journalists attempted to write about the fate of the Belarusian protest movement, their efforts to collect field data were complicated by safety precautions and the dangerous conditions under which human rights advocates and activists operate in Belarus.

One of the topics that Swedish readers remembered was the story of the Kuznechikovs, a father and son who asked for asylum at the Swedish embassy. It is worth mentioning that the creation of such pieces usually depends on the personal initiative of individual journalists, rather than the editorial office. In turn, editors are more interested in “breaking news” and topics connected with international security.

The French media spoke about the migration crisis from the point of view that Lukashenka was pressuring Poland and the EU as a response to sanctions, and that Putin had condoned these actions. Articles covering the events expressed concern about the possible consequences of the migration crisis for France. The far-right in France criticised the reaction of the Polish government, even though radical French politicians have close ties with Russia.

The topic of Belarus is covered in the Lithuanian media on a regular basis, although statements from the regime in Minsk get the most attention; the opposition in exile and political court cases inside the country are covered occasionally: “It’s worth noting that Lithuanians are interested in finding out what Belarusian propaganda says, even if it’s absolute nonsense.”

IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WAR, BELARUS IS PERCEIVED AS A THREAT TO THE NATIONAL SECURITY OF ITS NEIGHBOURS.

The central Belarus-related topic in the context of the war is the possibility of mobilisation and Belarus’s full-scale participation in Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.

“Belarus began being perceived as a threat to the national security of Lithuania as early as the migration crisis. This threat is now growing. The lack of trade contracts with Belarus and the reduction of communication has also had an effect. Some residents of Lithuania continue to travel to Belarus, but there is a consensus among most Lithuanians that Belarus poses a threat.”

Journalists who have been working in Kyiv since the beginning of the war note that they are in constant contact with Belarusian volunteers, members of BySol, and the Kalino ski regiment. The relations between Tsikhanouskaya’s team and the office of Zelensky were also covered, as were problems connected with the legalisation of Belarusians, who are perceived by the Ukrainian authorities as citizens of a co-aggressor country.

THERE ISN’T A SINGLE UNAMBIGUOUS OPINION ABOUT THE “COLLECTIVE GUILT” OF BELARUSIANS, NOR ARE THE ACTIONS OF THE REGIME AND THE INTERESTS OF BELARUSIAN SOCIETY ALWAYS CLEARLY DIFFERENTIATED.

We asked a series of questions on whether or not—according to respondents—perceptions of Belarus have changed due to the country’s participation in Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. Answers were contradictory: on the one hand, respondents noted that they personally, their newspapers, and—correspondingly—their readers, understand that the actions of Lukashenka must not be equated with the will of the Belarusian people.

“That’s our job: to give hints and present the facts in order to show our audience that there’s a difference between Lukashenka and society.”

“We have been writing that Belarus was used as a springboard for Russia’s attack on Ukraine, and I think that we clearly underlined that Belarusians had no other choice than to be part of this war.”

When it comes to the media in countries that don’t border Belarus or Ukraine and for whom the war does not pose an immediate security threat, their audience: “may not even know that Belarus is involved in Russia’s war against Ukraine, they need to be reminded of this specifically.” On the other hand, the Lithuanian media reiterate the opinion of Lithuanian politicians that democratically minded Belarusians have already fled the country, and the only ones left are the “silent collaborationists” who bear responsibility for Russia’s aggression from Belarusian territory.

We specifically did not include representatives of the Ukrainian media in our interviews, as Ukrainian society is understandably polarised vis-à-vis Belarus, and in order to draw a balanced

conclusion regarding the attitudes of the Ukrainian media and society towards the country's northern neighbour, we would need to conduct separate research. Nevertheless, we did consider the opinions of English-language journalists who work in Kyiv and write about Belarus:

“I follow the Ukrainian media. Ukrainian politicians and the expert community are hostile towards Belarus as a co-aggressor country, and they argue about whether or not the Belarusian people bear responsibility. In the ‘Western’ media that I represent, there is no such a notion as ‘Belarusian’ collective guilt.”

Journalists who wrote about the legalisation problems faced by Belarusians in Ukraine noted that “it’s unfair to accuse Belarusians of not being able to stop the shelling from their territory.”

We found a certain discrepancy between the results of our media analysis and the comments of journalists regarding whether or not members of the Belarusian ruling class are independent from the will of the Kremlin or if they are “partners”. According to the media analysis, in 73% of materials Lukashenka is presented as a “friend” of Putin, although during interviews all eight respondents noted that they underline the vassal-like dependence of Minsk on Moscow in their articles.

“Those who specialise in Eastern Europe understand that Lukashenka is Putin’s puppet, and this is the assumption we use when we do our reporting.”

INFORMATION ABOUT THE OPPOSITION IN EXILE IS PRESENTED BRIEFLY: “IT’S ENOUGH TO WRITE THAT THEY ARE PRO-DEMOCRACY”.

All journalists who took part in our conversations noted that they are in contact with the office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and other pro-democracy forces in Vilnius and Warsaw.

Because the headquarters of the democratic forces in exile are located in Vilnius, the following remarks of a Lithuanian journalist seem to be indicative, since to a certain extent they reflect the personal attitude of some representatives of the Lithuanian media. Such notions also influence the formation of public opinion in Lithuania:

“The Lithuanian public began to follow the Belarusian democratic forces when Tsikhanouskaya was in Lithuania, as people were curious, but this interest gradually faded away.”

“I recall that we used to write about the internal affairs of the Belarusian opposition, but this never got much attention. I also know jokes in Lithuanian circles about how [the opposition] was unable to really change anything, and that now not many people attend solidarity demonstrations in Vilnius.”

The respondents noted that they try to describe the composition of the Belarusian democratic forces “as simply as possible”, so that their audiences understand:

“When you write a 10,000-symbol article, you have to simplify the material, but we’re still trying to educate our audiences.”

“It seems to me that not much is happening [with the opposition]. We wrote a little about Tsapkala’s forum in Berlin, but we aren’t able to cover the inner workings of the democratic forces.”

“In the Swedish context it’s not necessary to give a detailed explanation of how the Belarusian opposition works: it’s enough to note that they’re democratic.”

“We wrote several articles about the internal workings of the Belarusian opposition, especially about the conflicts between Latushka and Tsikhanouskaya’s office.”

“NAIVETY” IS THE REASON FOR THE DEFEAT OF THE DEMOCRATIC PROTEST MOVEMENT, EVEN IF “SOMETHING CHANGED IN THE PUBLIC CONSCIOUSNESS.”

The question “Why didn’t the 2020 protests lead to democratic change?” is quite sensitive. We asked journalists about this issue, not wishing to force them to be biased in their assessments. Nevertheless, we thought it would be useful to find out the opinions of specialists, as they themselves tend to pose similar questions to Belarusian and foreign experts, politicians, and activists.

A number of respondents pointed out that Lukashenka had a significant advantage in terms of the structure of power. At the same time, some held the opinion that “the regime is doomed to collapse because of the combination of international isolation and pressure from the inside.”



“There was a certain naivety that simply taking to the streets would lead to radical change. At the same time, Minsk residents who went out to protest understood that their neighbours held the same opinions that they did. Something was created during the democratic upsurge; some sort of new understanding of identity and nationhood was born.”

In the Belarusian public space, people often stated that on the streets, they had witnessed the appearance of a new sense of national unity among supporters of democratic change. Tellingly, the journalists we interviewed all had similar thoughts, probably due to their close communication with members of the Belarusian public.

ADVICE FROM JOURNALISTS ON INCREASING THE VISIBILITY OF BELARUS



“In terms of the region, most media attention is focused on the war. It may be worth describing the high stakes for Belarus in this conflict: that could help get the attention of international readers.”

“The media pay a lot of attention to Lukashenka: he spouts some nonsense, and we journalists have to react. When activists come to us, they often send us figures—like the number of political prisoners, but it’s hard to write about this without a story, without personal narrative. You can’t evoke sympathy from readers with numbers alone.”

“How interested are people in reading about Belarus? I came across the same problem when I was covering events in Russia: everyone wants to know about what the Kremlin’s doing and the implications for world politics, but are many people interested in reading about the lives of ordinary Russians? Obviously, the audience pays the most attention to what could affect their everyday life. This is a fundamental paradox of journalism. Even though our newspaper has had many generations of

correspondents who focus on Eastern Europe, we don't have a single expert who works specifically on Belarus. At the end of the day, we are writing for an audience interested in completely different topics, like the environment in Brazil or African politics, but we try to write stories that get their attention. There has to be some breaking news story or a universal theme: the democratic movement, gender equality, or the climate. The events in Belarus then need to be connected to this."

To conclude, we would like to share the following opinion, which concerns not only the reactions of Belarusians to people sticking up for their rights in forced emigration, but also their reactions to getting attention from the international press:

“*The Belarusians I've dealt with were always grateful for the attention they received. I sometimes asked the question: maybe Belarusians could do with a little bit more self-confidence, in a positive sense. I've dealt with emigrants from other countries who demand that their rights be respected. Meanwhile, Belarusians who face discrimination still seem ashamed to stick up for themselves, and they're surprised by acts of support, as if they don't deserve it.*”

CONCLUSIONS

The image of the country in the foreign media depends strongly on the whims of the media market: it is journalists' prerogative to attract as many readers as possible through vivid stories and coverage of crises and political events. Recognising this, we don't necessarily see the decrease in attention to Belarusian society and the opposition compared with last year as a lack of interest in Belarus. Alongside the events in Belarus, in 2021–2022 there were protests in Kazakhstan, demonstrations in Myanmar, a new flare up in the Armenia-Azerbaijan war, and the war in Ukraine. At the same time, the Belarusian agenda remains relevant for the media outlets we analysed and the journalists with whom we spoke.

Journalists noted that the impossibility of covering Belarus as thoroughly as before has had an impact on the number of articles written about the country. This has to do with the fact that foreign journalists were stripped of their accreditation and had a difficult time getting visas. Reporters also faced pressure in Belarus when they worked, and Belarusian journalists were forced to leave the country or go underground, which rendered them unable to communicate with their colleagues from abroad. Journalists' network of contacts is fairly wide, but the inaccessibility of Belarus complicates the situation. At the same time, journalists' connections with democratic political and public figures have a positive effect on coverage of Belarus, even in terms of the narratives that are relayed to the foreign media.

Our conversations with journalists largely confirmed the findings from our content analysis. For example, articles about Lukashenka and the Belarusian government are more numerous than articles about Tsikhanouskaya. Meanwhile, whereas our analysis showed that Lukashenka was most often portrayed as a friend of Putin, interviews with journalists revealed that they personally perceived Lukashenka to be a puppet of the Russian president and wrote about Belarusian-Russian relations accordingly.

The foreign media usually described Belarusians as victims of a regime that brutally suppressed the protests and dragged the population into a war. The image of the “co-aggressor” was much rarer. It's likely that public criticism of Belarusians, as well as their tactics of resistance and protest, is not reflected in the international media, which strive to cover the situation neutrally. Most articles point out that Belarusians don't support Russia in its aggression against Ukraine. The journalists we spoke with made a clear distinction between the Belarusian regime and the Belarusian people. At the same time, when foreign politicians create a narrative about the collective responsibility of Belarusians as “tacit collaborationists”, this is also echoed in the media.

Compared to our last study, the diaspora has become more visible in the international media. We attribute this to stronger ties between the diaspora and journalists, as well as the vigorous activity of Belarusian civil society outside Belarus.

Our research revealed a range of problems associated with the image of Belarus in the international media. First and foremost is the general decline of interest in Belarus outside the geopolitical situation. Secondly, little attention is given to the activities of Belarusian political and public figures, both in the country and in exile. As a result, media outlets focus mainly on the figure of Lukashenka rather than Tsikhanouskaya, who gets far less media attention.

In our opinion, the strengthening ties between Belarusian society and democratic/political actors will have a positive effect on editorial decisions, as editors will encourage journalists to cover Belarus. The journalists themselves noted that sometimes they had a personal interest in these stories, which somewhat contradicts the general policy of editorial offices on covering breaking news. For international audiences, the topic of Belarus is “niche” — it mostly engages people with a special interest in Eastern Europe. As such, the international media tends to pay attention to Belarus during moments of crisis. At the same time, individual journalists who are fostering a personal network of contacts with Belarusians do wish to write about the situation in the country and Belarusians in exile.

We assume that there is no simple, clear-cut way for the topic of Belarus to transcend its perception as “niche” in the international community and global media. However, there are several possible angles that Belarusian journalists and public figures could take to drive the discourse on Belarus, thereby piquing the interest of the international media:

- first, they could speak of the high stakes for Belarus in the context of the war, pointing out that the definitive loss of Belarus to Russia’s sphere of influence and the defeat of the democratic movement would have serious repercussions for the entire region;
- secondly, they should keep in mind that in the absence of “breaking news”, it’s more effective to convey information via storytelling using personal examples, or by connecting the Belarusian context to more global themes that spark the international reader’s interest regardless of where they live. Examples could be the environment or gender equality.

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